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ABSTRACT

Identifying effective reading instruction through "process-product" research narrowly focuses attention on immediate practice and desirable outcomes as measured by tests. Failure to conduct long-term research and make instructional decisions within a historical context may discourage discovering new and innovative ways to teach reading. "Process-product" research implies that effective reading instruction is static, when in reality it is highly subject to social and educational change. (Author)

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Identifying effective reading instruction through "process-product" research narrowly focuses attention on immediate practice and desirable outcomes as measured by tests. Failure to conduct long term research and make instructional decisions within an historical context may discourage discovering new and innovative ways to teach reading. "Process-product" research implies that effective reading instruction is static, when in reality it is highly subject to social and educational change.

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Rediscovering Effective Reading Instruction: An Essay

By Albert B. Tucker

The descriptions of effective reading instruction change over time and setting, influenced by social issues, world events, government intervention, and economics. Describing effective reading instruction is an elusive task, and it should be. A static description would indicate that the author ignored the one characteristic of education that remains constant across time and setting: **change**. The only thing that does not seem to change is change itself, and the changes are not often accumulative and fresh. More often, changes in education are cyclical. What appears to be new probably incorporates elements used in systems by prior generations in a variety of settings. The historical changes within the cycle have multiple causes that cannot be traced to a single factor (Venezky, 1971, p.249).

The quest for **the** effective process for teaching reading is elusive because what works **now** in one setting may not work **later** in a different setting (Duffy, 1983, p.435). Research into effective teaching is, at best, "a snapshot of one point of an ever changing dynamic" (Condon & Kapel, 1986, p.127). Research can only describe an effective process for a specific time and place with a certain sample of students being taught by a particular kind of teacher. What works one day may not work another day, even with the same students and teacher. Cloning a process to another setting and teacher, with a different sample of students, is a doubtful way to generalize an effective way of teaching reading. The variables are

just too many, and the expectations are too fluid to accept a static view of effectiveness. The best we can do is to look at reading instruction as it has been described across time and settings, and then to extrapolate from the historical narratives and data the elements that continually surface which are associated with effective reading instruction. Teaching processes "sometimes educationally were done very well in the past, perhaps better than we do them now..." (Cranney & Miller, 1987, p.390). An historical review of literature and research on effective teaching of reading as described across time and setting may help discover basic principles applicable for all seasons.

Recent investigations have attempted to isolate effectiveness through what is called "process-product" research, in which student outcomes are compared to the processes used by teachers. The assumption is that if a process results in desirable outcomes, then that process must be effective. Although this kind of research may hold great promise (Blair & Rupley, 1983, p.341), caution should restrain us from overly optimistic conclusions, knowing that multitudes of variables are influencing the outcomes. Cranney & Miller cited a conclusion by Monaghan (1976): "According to this thesis, classroom practice and major instructional emphasis is more influenced by the temper of the times and events in society than from the impact of reading research" (Cranney & Miller, 1987, p.391).

Teacher effectiveness should not be tied only to student outcomes, for society's desired outcomes tend to fluctuate. The teacher of the 1970s who produced students with strong self-concepts and who stayed in school until graduation was considered to be an effective teacher. That same teacher may not be considered effective in the 1990s if the students fail to score high on achievement examinations, regardless of self-concept and school attendance. The change from the social goals of the 1970s to the skills goals of the 1990s changed the definition of effective teaching. Similarly, societal and technological changes in the demands of how, when, why, and what to read will continue to change perceptions of worthy reading instructional outcomes.

Nila Banton Smith, in her preface to American Reading Instruction (1965), noted that movements in reading instruction tend to overlap and coexist. A major problem is that of "characterizing reading instruction during the different periods of emphasis without conveying the impression that all reading aims, methods, and materials of the time conformed to the general characterization" (p.x, Preface). The history of reading instruction is "marked by random shots in different directions, and that there were always some authors whose convictions varied from the great body of opinion" (p.x, Preface). Attempts to gain conformity by cloning processes tends to stifle creativity and motivation for discovering new and better ways to teach reading.

If we fail to look at effective reading instruction historically, we will probably repeat mistakes and, worse, ignore the successes of the past. Before we start nailing down dos and don'ts about effective reading based on "process-product" research, we had better know what has worked and not worked in the past and why. Research that focuses only on the moment is short-sighted and may even hinder break-throughs into new and unexplored processes.

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